

**Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)<sup>1</sup>**  
**Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART)<sup>2</sup> &**  
**Norwegian Mission to the East (NME)<sup>3</sup>**

**Visit to the Chin Peoples on the India-Burma Border**

**March 3-9, 2006**

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## **I. Summary**

Forced labour, torture and religious persecution are continuing in Chin State, according to evidence presented to a delegation from Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) and Norwegian Mission to the East (NME) on a visit to the Chin peoples on the India-Burma border. Extensive eye-witness accounts of prison labour conditions show prisoners working on road construction projects, rubber plantations and tea plantations in shackles in Chin State and other parts of Burma. An eyewitness told the delegation that prisoners in one labour camp are yoked like oxen and forced to plough the fields.

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide is an international human rights advocacy organisation, with partners in UK, USA, Australia, Hong Kong, India, Norway, Denmark and France. A CSW delegation visited the Chin and Kachin refugees in New Delhi and Mizoram in 2004. For more information see [www.csw.org.uk](http://www.csw.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> The Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) focuses primarily on providing medical and other humanitarian aid in conflict areas in parts of the world forgotten or unreachable by other international organisations. For more information see [www.hart-uk.org](http://www.hart-uk.org)

<sup>3</sup> NME is a missions and human rights organisation based in Oslo. For more information see [www.nmio.org](http://www.nmio.org)

In addition, extensive reports were presented of the deteriorating health care situation in Chin State. “We predict a humanitarian crisis in Chin State this year,” the Chairman of the Chin National Front (CNF), Thomas Thang No, told the delegation. Salaries are repeatedly cut, and taxation is levied on water, electricity and housing. Each household has to pay between 15,000 and 20,000 kyats per year in taxes for water, electricity and other services, amounting to 15-20% of the average wage. A teacher, for example, earns between 100,000 and 150,000 kyats a year. The Chin population in Chin State has declined from 441,000 in 1997 to an estimated 435,000 in 2005, according to the CNF.

The ruling military regime, the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC), continues to suppress all opposition and to persecute the Chin peoples, who are ninety per cent Christian, on three counts: ethnicity, politics and religion. According to the CNF Chairman, all senior commanders and administrators ruling Chin State are non-Chins. “We are totally under the rule of a non-Chin army,” he said. The SPDC is currently developing its own “civil society” organizations, such as the Union Solidarity & Development Association (USDA), in preparation for future elections. In his analysis, the SPDC will build up the USDA, which is considered a voice of the regime, in order to defeat the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other democratic and ethnic opposition groups. Among its restrictions on humanitarian aid work in Burma, the SPDC requires all Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) operating within Burma to co-operate with the USDA.

There are an estimated 50,000 Chin refugees in Mizoram State, India. The delegation met Chin groups in Aizawl, Mizoram State, including leaders of the CNF, the Women’s League of Chinland, the Backpack Health Worker Teams and several pastors and church leaders. The delegation also traveled to the India-Burma border to visit two clinics and meet Chin people who traveled across the border from Burma.

## **2. Purposes**

- a) To obtain up-to-date information on the human rights and humanitarian situation in Chin State;
- b) To provide humanitarian assistance to the Chin peoples;
- c) To assess needs and potential for future assistance;
- d) To show solidarity with the Chin peoples in the midst of persecution.

## **3. Personnel**

Baroness (Caroline) Cox  
Benedict Rogers  
Robert Colefax  
Irene Colefax  
Nicholas Mellor  
Amanda Mellor  
Ed Brown

Chief Executive, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART)  
Advocacy Officer, South Asia, CSW-UK; Trustee, HART  
President, CSW Australia  
Board Member, CSW Australia  
Trustee, HART  
HART Supporter  
Human Rights Adviser, NME

#### 4. Itinerary

March 3	Arrive, Kolkata; Meeting with British Deputy High Commission
March 4	Travel to Aizawl, Mizoram; Meetings with Chin National Front & Backpack Health Worker Team
March 5	Travel to Champai on the India-Burma border; Visit Clinics
March 6	Meetings; return to Aizawl
March 7	Meetings with Chin pastors, and Women's League of Chinland Dinner with Chin community
March 9	Return to Kolkata

#### 5. Aid

##### Backpack Health Worker Teams

375,000 Rupees (£5,000) donated by HART  
 37,500 Rupees (£500) donated by CSW UK  
 100,000 Rupees (£1,300) donated by CSW Australia  
 22,500 Rupees (£300) donated by Mrs. Juliet Rogers & friends

##### Medical Mercy Mizoram Clinics

75,000 Rupees (£1,000) donated by HART  
 20,000 Rupees (£270) donated by CSW UK  
 20,000 Rupees (£270) donated by CSW Australia  
 20,000 Rupees (£270) donated by Mrs. Juliet Rogers & friends

#### 6. Human Rights Violations

The delegation interviewed several Chin who provided first-hand accounts of forced labour, religious persecution and the conditions of prison labour camps. In addition, the CNF provided background information on the military and political situation affecting the Chin people.

##### ***Military rule***

The Burma Army has six battalions stationed in Chin State – Light Infantry Battalions 268, 266, 269, 140, 274 and 304. Each battalion should consist of 1,000 soldiers, but because of mass defections many battalions are greatly reduced, according to CNF. One battalion in particular has been reduced to less than 450 soldiers. The Burma Army therefore forcibly recruits new troops, including child soldiers. CNF troops have rescued child soldiers as young as 14 years old who have escaped from the Burma Army. Soldiers are paid a salary of only 10,000 kyats, and after taxes their cash-in-hand salary amounts to 3,000 kyats. As a result, soldiers are encouraged to loot and steal from villagers.

##### ***Forced Labour***

Another result of poor salaries for soldiers is that local villagers are forced to work for and act as porters for SPDC troops. Continuing reports of forced labour and forced

portering emerge from Chin State. In recent years, orders to villages from the SPDC for forced labour contributions have either been issued verbally, or in writing. In cases where the order is issued in writing, the village headman has been required to destroy the written order subsequently. Examples were provided of forced labour, usually involving prisoners, on tea plantations, rubber plantations and road construction projects, as well as forced portering. Extensive reports were given of the existence of prison labour camps, where prisoners have been sentenced to a term of “prison with hard labour”. The motto of such camps is “pay back with our sweat for our sins”. Photographic evidence was provided showing prisoners in forced labour, chained at their ankles and legs. An estimated 20 per cent of prisoners in hard labour have died due to the conditions. (See section on Conditions in Prison Camps in Burma).

*Interview with Mr. X, a Chin man who had been used as a forced porter*

Mr. X came to India in April 2005. He had been used as a forced porter. Men are forced to carry 50kg of rice, and soldiers’ clothes, and when they become tired and unable to walk any more, the soldiers kick them and beat them. When women are portering, they are often raped – soldiers allow the men to go first, and ask the women to wait. They offer to carry the loads for the women, but then rape them. Although documentary evidence is not yet available, this indicates that sexual violence against women may be as common in Chin state as has been documented in other states in Burma. In an interview with a representative of the Women’s League of Chinland, it was learned that a report on sexual violence against women is forthcoming, due to be published in the summer of 2006.

### **Conditions in Prison Camps**

‘Yebet Jails’ or ‘Yebet Sakhan’ are a type of prison labour camp. It is estimated that there are 110 such camps, dispersed throughout every state in Burma. Numbers of prisoners in each camp range from 50-1000. The number of camps varies with the SPDC’s requirements for labour.

*Interview with Pastor ‘Samuel’, who visits prisoners in these ‘Yebet jails’:* He has visited camps on many occasions, taking medical aid and food to prisoners. In this way he has been able to obtain first hand evidence of the conditions in which prisoners live and work. There are several categories of prisoners in these camps: some are convicted criminals while some have been arbitrarily arrested and detained - for example, one boy who took a horse for a ‘joy ride’ was sent, without trial, to a camp for ‘stealing’. This seems to indicate that the internationally accepted practice of due process is not consistently practiced in Burma.

During transit to the camps, prisoners are shackled and have to keep their heads bowed. If they look up, they are beaten; if they scream or cry out, they are beaten again. On arrival at the camp, they are ‘welcomed’ by further beating to intimidate them.

Conditions in the camps vary, but are always harsh:

*Food:* Standard food rations for one meal may consist of a spoon of boiled rice mixed with wild banana leaf and sweet potato leaf. Prisoners are so hungry that they eat their guards' pig swill on the way to work. If caught doing this, they are severely beaten. Some prisoners reportedly eat their own faeces.

*Sleep deprivation:* In some (at least four) camps, each prisoner had an empty milk can attached to the end of his bunk. Every night, he was required to wake up every 15 minutes, to strike the can and to shout his personal number in order to prove he had not escaped.

*Physical maltreatment:* Prisoners are constantly chained with leg-irons attached to an iron belt. If they can bribe the jailer, they will be given light-weight chains; if not, they have to suffer the constant discomfort of heavy chains. The constant chafing causes lacerations which become swollen, inflamed and, in some instances, infected.

*Clothing:* Their only garments are a thin shirt and 'longyi' ('sarong'). Those who work in paddy fields are bitten by water leeches; all suffer cuts and bruising from being beaten by jailers. All the lacerations caused by the chains, the bites and the beatings cause localized and systemic infections. As they are not given any medical treatment, many die.

*Work:* Prisoners have to work from 6am to 6pm, without a rest, except for their meal break. Even those who are sick or blind have to work. Many die of exhaustion, disease and malnutrition.

*Measures to deter escape attempts:* The camps have relatively few guards, so in order to prevent prisoners from attempting to escape, harsh punishments are imposed, sometimes resulting in death. Anyone caught trying to escape may be subjected to horrendous torture: some have their hands tied behind their back and are dragged along the ground 'like a dead animal'; others are laid out on the ground, bound hand and foot. Others have had burning bamboo placed alongside them so that they are slowly 'roasted'. If they scream because of the pain, a heated crowbar is used to pierce their flesh until the bone is exposed. It takes two to three days for the victim to die.

*Interview with Ms. Y, a Chin woman who recently visited labour camps*

Ms. Y, a Chin woman, who cannot be named for security reasons, told us that she visited her home village in January, 2006 and brought back evidence of the use of prison labour. The conditions of the prison camps were, she said, "very inhumane". Prisoners in the "New Life" camp, on the road towards the India-Burma border, 55 miles from Kalaymyo, were yoked around the neck and forced to work ploughing the fields like buffalo. They were fed banana leaves, and a small amount of rice each day. Prisoners working in the rubber plantation were chained together

### ***Religious persecution***

The SPDC continues to target Chin Christians, who amount to 90 per cent of the population, for their faith as well as their ethnicity. Restrictions exist throughout Burma prohibiting gatherings of more than 20 people and the construction of new churches.

Some Christians have been forced to sign an agreement not to worship in their homes, according to a Chin pastor. No such restrictions exist on Buddhist activities. Obtaining permission to construct a new church involves several stages, and permission can be refused at any stage, by the township authorities or higher levels of government. Army officers and government officials who approve the construction of churches face penalties. "It is totally impossible to build a church," the pastor said. Christians in some parts of Chin State have been forced to pay bribes of between 10,000-20,000 kyats in order to continue church activities. Christians are denied promotion in the military beyond the rank of Major, and all officers above the rank of Major must be Buddhist. Christian pastors are often used for forced labour, particularly on Sundays, while Buddhist monks are exempt.

Certain Christian terms and phrases are prohibited by the SPDC. According to a Chin pastor, the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes contain terms which are similar to Buddhist Pali terms. The Burma Bible Society was told to exclude these terms in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes from their Burmese translations of the Bible, and so they are no longer translating the Bible, on principle. Copies of the Bible cost 20,000 kyats, which most people cannot afford. Bibles in Chin language are not permitted to be printed in Burma.

In October, 1998, several churches were destroyed on the orders of the SPDC in Chin State.

A special army battalion, stationed in Kalaymyo, Sagaing Division, was created with the purpose of incentivising soldiers to marry Chin women, especially the daughters of Chin pastors, in an attempt to destroy Chin Christian culture. Some soldiers did marry Chin Christians, but the strategy backfired, according to a Chin pastor, when many Buddhist soldiers became Christians, instead of converting their wives to Buddhism. The battalion was disbanded because the strategy was not successful. Those soldiers who converted to Christianity were denied promotion and transferred to other places. Those soldiers who succeeded in converting their Chin Christian wives to Buddhism were promoted.

The SPDC has constructed numerous Buddhist pagodas throughout Chin State, often forcing Chin Christians to contribute money or labour to the construction of the pagodas. According to the CNF, the construction of pagodas is a symbol of control and occupation, and so they have political as well as religious significance. A large pagoda has been built on the third highest mountain, Mount Victoria (10,020 ft), in Chin State and was delivered by helicopter. A cross was removed from Mount Rung in 1996, and replaced with a large Buddha and pagoda. Reports continue of crosses being destroyed and replaced with pagodas. In 1984, Rev. Saw Ling built a cross on top of a mountain near Falam, and the cross burned down accidentally as a result of "slash-and-burn". Christians were not permitted to rebuild the cross, and instead the authorities built a pagoda in its place.

The SPDC has also attempted to convert Christians to Buddhism, for example through inducements such as offering rice if they become Buddhists or through providing educational opportunities for children, conditional upon the children participating in Buddhist worship. Christian parents send their children to Buddhist-run orphanages or schools for free, because they cannot afford government schools. They

are left with little choice but to participate in Buddhist worship if they want their children to receive education.

In a town in Magwe Division, Buddhist monks, supported by the SPDC, recently issued an order prohibiting the practice of Christianity from the town. A Christian government official tried to organize a Christian worship service and was ordered not to proceed. He went ahead despite this order, and local people came to stone his house, threatening him and ordering him to stop all Christian activities in the area.

In a town near Rangoon, in 2005, a Christian-run orphanage and school purchased some land, but the local authorities refused permission to build the orphanage on the land. The case went to court, and the court ruled against the Christian-run orphanage. It was reported that the central SPDC government had already ordered the district court not to permit any Christian group to buy land. However, eventually after a million kyat bribe, the decision was overturned and the Christians were able to use the land.

In a previous visit in 2004, the delegation obtained evidence of the extensive, deliberate provision of lethal industrial alcohol, known as “OB”, by the SPDC to the Chin population. As Chin culture generally prohibits alcohol, this is a deliberate strategy to destroy Chin society and cohesion. Continuing reports of this strategy were received during this visit, and a sample of “OB” was provided to the delegation for testing (results of tests to follow). According to sources, those who use “OB” regularly are paralysed within ten months, and often die.

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## **7. Health Care**

The delegation was given a briefing on the health care provision in Chin State by the Chairman of the CNF. We also visited two clinics for Chin people in Mizoram State – one at the border crossing town of Zokhawthar and one in Champai.

### ***Health Care in Chin State***

All of the nine main townships have hospitals, but only two of them have functioning facilities. The biggest hospital is in Falam, with about 100 beds; there is a smaller hospital in Haka. There is an acute shortage of doctors because the majority are Burmese, who do not like living in Chin State, because of the hardship of life there. There are no Chin qualified doctors, because of insurmountable problems of ethnic discrimination and the costs of training: it is impossible to study at advanced or university level, as there is no provision of higher education in Chin State and it is very costly to travel and to study elsewhere (it would cost at least 100,000 kyat a month to study medicine elsewhere in Burma).

The number of doctors required for Chin State should be 70; at present, there are only 22-25, with one doctor per 80,000 population. There is also such an acute shortage of medicines that there may be none at all available in many places for much of the time.

There are eight Health Assistant Centres but no doctors in any of these. There are also some nurses, but they do not stay because there are no medicines available to enable them to provide treatment.

The main diseases include: Malaria, TB, Dysentery and other gastro-intestinal diseases, HIV/AIDS, Thyroid goiters. Malnutrition is also widespread.

### ***Zokhawthar Clinic***

Situated very close to the bridge which is the border crossing between India and Burma, this clinic serves the local village, populated by Chin people, as well as many Chin people who cross the border because they cannot receive health care in Chin State.

The clinic receives financial support from Mizoram Medical Mercy, with Canadian funding. While this support makes this very important work possible, there is a shortfall, due to the level of demand: 1675 patients in 2005. There is one Health Care Assistant and one office Assistant. There is a need for a doctor, but no-one is willing to live and work in this remote area.

The clinic was impressive in the quality of care being given to two inpatients and in general characteristics of orderliness, cleanliness and record-keeping. There was a reasonable supply of many basic medicines. However, the staff emphasized their need for a microscope and for basic training for a laboratory technician.

One very impressive reflection of the sacrificial dedication of local people trying to do their best to help each other was the donation of the house by one of the committee members: he gave up his own home for the clinic, moving to live with his family in a much smaller house nearby.

As the clinic is clearly providing essential services for Chin people in great need of health care, including many living across the border in Chin State, deprived of any health service, HART gave a donation of 75,000 rupees (approx. £1,000) to be divided between this clinic and the sister clinic at Champai. CSW UK and CSW Australia each donated 20,000 rupees (£270).

### ***Champai Clinic***

This clinic is also very impressive: immaculately clean, excellent records reflect the caliber of the staff (see table of patient numbers and diagnoses). The provision of a microscope would also greatly enhance the quality of treatment, enabling more accurate and speedy diagnoses.

The commitment of the local community to the provision of health care for their people was reflected here in the donation of 80,000 rupees in 2005 to move the clinic from very small room to the present large and airy building, clearly providing high quality and much-needed care to the local Chin refugees. An ensuing problem had also been resolved: when local Mizo people saw this excellent facility, they also wanted free treatment, which would overstretch available resources. However, an agreement was reached whereby the clinic would provide a free consultation, but the Mizo people would pay for any treatment needed. This solution created goodwill and has helped to promote good relations between the two communities.

### ***Support for Cross-border mobile back-pack health teams:***

HART gave a donation of 225,000 (£3,000) to support this lifesaving work for Chin people deprived of access to health care in Chin State. CSW Australia donated 100,000 rupees (£1,330), CSW UK donated 37,500 rupees (£500), and a donation was also made from Mrs. Juliet Rogers and other individual donors of 22,500 rupees (£300).



## 8. Education

In Chin State, there are 25 high schools, 83 middle schools and 1058 primary schools provided by the government, and a further 32 self-supported schools. All classes are taught in Burmese, not Chin language. Students are only allowed to study Chin language as an additional subject. Teachers are not paid enough and so many have to supplement their salary by offering further tuition at home. One man told us that his wife, as a middle school teacher, currently earns 7,000 kyat a month, and this has been cut over several years.

## 9. Conclusions and Recommendations

Evidence provided in this report adds to the numerous reports, documented by other organisations over many years, of widespread, systematic forced labour, torture, sexual violence and other gross violations of human rights throughout Burma. Unfortunately there is relatively little international attention paid to the plight of the ethnic nationalities along the borders of Burma, and what little attention there is seems to be focused on the Thai-Burmese border. The difficulties faced by the ethnic nationalities along Burma's western border receive even less attention. Because of this, many Chin people feel particularly forgotten – one person told us that “Chin State is very poor and very ignored”. We therefore urge the international community, including Her Majesty's Government, the European Union, the Association of South-East Asian Nations, the United States, Australia and Norway to:

- a) Increase pressure on the ruling State Peace and Development Council to enter into tripartite dialogue with the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the Ethnic Nationalities Council;
- b) Bring the issue of Burma to the agenda of the United Nations Security Council, as recommended in the report *Threat to the Peace* commissioned by former Czech President Vaclav Havel and Nobel Laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu;
- c) Consider initiatives to bring the SPDC to account for crimes against humanity and genocide;
- d) Urge the Governments of India and China to use their influence with the SPDC to increase pressure for a transition to democracy, the rule of law and respect for basic human rights;
- e) Urge the Government of India, and the Mizoram Government in particular, to continue to provide sanctuary for those fleeing persecution in Burma, and to desist from preventing or disrupting the activities of democratic opposition groups from Burma operating in India;
- f) Consider provision of urgently needed humanitarian assistance to the impoverished and displaced peoples on the western borders of Burma.